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Department Of Defense Press Briefing By Assistant To The Secretary Of Defense Hoffman

ASSISTANT TO THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JONATHAN RATH HOFFMAN: All right, good afternoon, everybody. Thank you all for -- for being here today so that we can provide you with some additional information regarding events taking place tomorrow.

With me today are Tom Muir, the director of Washington Headquarters Services, and also the -- the lead for the Department of Defense transition team. And then General Dan Hokanson, the chief of the National Guard Bureau.

I want to thank them both for being here today on what I imagine is likely one of the busiest -- if not the busiest -- days of their careers, as they both prepare for events tomorrow.

In just a moment, Mr. Muir will provide an update on transition planning activities to include activities taking place tomorrow on -- and including the continuity of command here at the Pentagon.

Following that, General Hokanson will provide an update on security efforts in the National Capital Region ahead of tomorrow's inauguration as well as efforts with the National Guard around the country and in the following days.

I have no other announcements, so we'll just go ahead, Tom?

THOMAS MUIR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you, Jonathan.

As Jonathan mentioned, I'm Tom Muir, director of Washington Headquarters Services. And for the purpose of this discussion, the agency transition director for the Presidential Transition Act support from the Department of Defense.

I can tell you that we are prepared to receive the agency new administration appointees beginning tomorrow at noon. We believe we're going to onboard a significant number of their political appointees the very first day, on day one, and get them straight to work in their new offices.

That includes -- we did virtual onboarding, obviously, due to COVID. We are processing their identity cards, their background investigations, their security clearances all virtually.

They'll receive their common access credential tomorrow afternoon. When they arrive at the Pentagon, they'll be met, concierged into the parking space, brought into our Pentagon Library and Conference Center, onboarded, their final documents, issue their common access credential, their I.T. access, their e-mail addresses on both unclassified and classified systems, and shown to their new offices.

They'll meet their teams, they'll be present in the offices -- particularly the front offices supporting. A number of these officials who are coming in are non-career senior executives, not Senate-confirmed but political appointees, and what we call Schedule Cs, or special advisers, or senior advisers to several of our DOD leaders.

I can announce, on behalf of the Biden administration -- we checked with them -- that the acting secretary of Defense, as of noon tomorrow, will be David Norquist, our current deputy secretary of Defense. The acting secretary of the Army will be John Whitley, once again at noon on -- tomorrow, on the 20th. Acting secretary of the Navy, Tom Harker, and the acting secretary of the Air Force, John Roth.

We also are working on and will publish soon an acting and a performing the duties of transition plan that has career senior executives filling in for incoming political appointees until such time as they either are confirmed and complete the nomination and confirmation process, or until they arrive in the Pentagon and onboard for those non-Senate-confirmed positions.

So we have a career senior executive acting or performing the duties of in all of our positions minus the four that I just mentioned: the secretary of Defense, secretary of the Army, secretary of the Navy, and the secretary of the Air Force.

Reference to transition, we are wrapping up our support to the Agency Review Teams. In support of that effort, we completed 231 interviews with 656 officials, and they've officially canceled kind of the remainder of the interviews because we're going to discuss that during our onboarding processes and when they meet their new teams.

The same for requests for information. We completed over 90 percent of the requests for information, and those which we have not yet completed, they'll roll over, once again, to the new discussions with the new administration members when they join the team tomorrow.

As you can tell, we are still practicing COVID mitigation efforts. The Biden-Harris team, of course, will lead those efforts here in the Pentagon, effective noon tomorrow. I can tell you that all the senior leadership is properly in place to execute both the National Defense Strategy and meet the DOD global commitments as we welcome the new Biden administration team to the Pentagon tomorrow afternoon.

That completes my opening remarks.

MR. HOFFMAN: OK.

General?

GEN HOKANSON: Good afternoon. I'm General Dan Hokanson. I want to thank you for the opportunity to highlight your National Guard soldiers and airmen.

As I speak, more than 25,000 National Guard men and women from all 50 states, three territories and the District of Columbia are here in support of the lead federal agency for the presidential inauguration.

I visit with these men and women every night, and they understand the importance of this mission. They're also proven, prepared and proud to do their part to ensure a peaceful and safe inauguration for our 46th commander in chief.

They are providing security, communications, logistics and coordination support to local and federal law enforcement, and have met every request promptly and professionally.

Looking across the entire National Guard, we have over 91,000 on duty today to include 22,000 supporting COVID-19, 16,000 deployed overseas, and over 6,000 protecting key infrastructure and capitol buildings in 30 of our states. Although 91 is a lot -- 91,000, it's less than 20 percent of your National Guard, so we have additional capability if and when needed.

Upon completion of the inauguration, we will continue to support federal law enforcement as requested, and our service members will return home as soon as conditions permit.

With respect to comments about extremism, let me be clear: Extremism is not tolerated in any branch of the United States Military. If there are reported issues, our leaders will address them immediately in accordance with established department policies, and in coordination with law enforcement.

With respect to the arming of the National Guard, the authority rests with the secretary of the Army and it is based on their mission, close coordination with the support of law enforcement agency and the chain of command, which is commanded by Major General William Walker of the D.C. National Guard.

Our ability to move 25,000 soldiers and airmen to DC from every state and territory in less than two weeks would not have been possible without the support of our governors and their adjutants general. It speaks volumes about America's investment in

the National Guard and most importantly, the support of our service members and what they get from their family and their employers.

Also, the outpouring of support to our National Guard across the entire country and here in the District is a story in itself and I wanted to particularly thank the citizens of the District of Columbia. With that, I look forward to your questions.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right, we'll -- if you have questions, just please identify who you'd like to have answer them. It's going to be a -- a -- kind of a COVID-safe dance over here to -- with -- just to get one more podium.

So we'll go first to -- to Lita, AP.

Q: Hi, Jonathan, thanks -- thanks a lot. This question is for General Hokanson but Jonathan, if you want to weigh in at all, that'd be great. General, I know you mentioned extremism. What can you tell us about the approximately a dozen or possibly more National Guard members who have been pulled off duty because of either posts on social media or other issues? How big of an effect do you think this is? Do you think there are more? And frankly any details on this that you can provide I think would -- would be -- would be good since obviously the general public is listening and watching this event with -- with great concern. Thank you.

MR. HOFFMAN: Lita, thank you for that question. And so we work very closely with law enforcement and if there's any identification or anything whatsoever that -- that needs to be looked into, out of an abundance of caution we automatically pull those personnel off the line and make sure that they're not part of the mission set, and in certain cases we make sure that we get them sent home.

But we're in very close coordination also within our organization. We're kind of a family in the National Guard, we grow up together, we work together and we keep an eye on each other, and if there's any indications, we immediately address it, through the chain of command or law enforcement, the appropriate level of agency, but I'm not concerned as a large part of our organization -- if you look at 25,000, we've had 12 identified and some of those, they're just looking into. It may be unrelated to this but we want to make sure, out of an abundance of caution, as I stated earlier, that we do the right thing until that gets cleared up.

MR. HOFFMAN: And so Lita, I -- I don't want to get into the actual vetting and - - and what partner organizations have found but much of the information is -- is -- as the General mentioned, is unrelated to the events taking place at the Capitol or to the concerns that many people have noted on -- on extremism.

These are vetting efforts that identify any questionable behavior in the past or any potential link to questionable behavior, not just related to extremism. But as General Hokanson mentioned, we're -- we're not -- we're not asking questions right now, we're not asking questions of people who are flagged, we are, out of an abundance of caution,

taking action and immediately removing them from -- from the line of duty at the Capitol and the events taking place and then we will address them, whether it's through law enforcement, if necessary, or through their own chain of command.

But the point here is that we have the vetting processes that are in place, we also have, as General Hokanson mentioned, internal to the ranks, as well -- people have made it clear that if you see something, you should -- you should raise it. We are taking steps to -- to ensure that there's no -- no concerns.

The American people should have confidence in the National Guard, they should have confidence in the law enforcement teams that are planning for this inauguration and ensuring that Vice President-elect -- or President-elect Biden has a safe and secure inauguration tomorrow.

OK? Jennifer?

Q: Just to -- to follow up on Lita's question, General Hokanson, you are confirming that there are 12 people who have been removed from National Guard duty. There are reports that two of those were linked to so-called right wing militias. Can -- are you confirming that as well right now?

GEN HOKANSON: All I would say with -- with those two individuals is inappropriate comments or texts that were put out there. And as we stated, just out of an abundance of caution, we want to make sure that -- that there's no issues at all and that those properly get looked into.

Q: And just in terms of generically, in this -- in the future, will this be sort of a standard kind of -- I mean, in the past, were you allowed to look at people's social media pages and things that they were texting or is this new to this inauguration or is this an ongoing thing that the National Guard has been doing?

GEN HOKANSON: So I'd have to defer to the FBI cause they do the -- the -- the vetting once our personnel are here but as I mentioned before, you know, we're a -- we're a close knit organization and we keep an eye on each other and if anything doesn't seem right, as Jonathan mentioned, if we see something, we're going to go ahead and report it.

Q: Did those individuals come to Washington and were sent home or they were not allowed to come to Washington?

GEN HOKANSON: In those cases, they were both here in Washington or -- and are being sent home.

Q: OK.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right, we're going to move on. Helene Cooper, New York Times?

Q: Hi. I'm still -- I'd like to go back to the -- continue on with those 12. Are you saying 12 were removed because you had concerns of ties to extremist organizations?

MR. HOFFMAN: No, that is -- that is not it. I think as General Hokanson mentioned, we have two individuals that identified -- had made inappropriate comments or texts. Those two individuals were removed -- I'll note -- one of those was flagged by -- by -- within the command -- and then we have another group of individuals that have been flagged in the vetting process for a number of different reasons -- like I said, unrelated to the events here and -- and the concerns that most people have posited. It's -- it's a -- it's a lot of looking back at anything that could potentially flag in a criminal history check, anything that could come up in a civilian database that's being scrubbed by our partners.

We're just not -- like I said, we're -- we're not taking any chances. Anything -- flags -- if there's any -- any reason that somebody's name is brought to the attention of the command, they're being removed from the line, we'll ask questions later and we will -- and -- and can -- ascertain whether any action needs to be taken by either law enforcement or by their chain of command.

But no, we're -- we are not saying that all 12 are -- have been pulled for -- for ties, I think as you characterized it, to extremists or militias. That is not correct, OK? All right, keep ...

(CROSS-TALK)

Q: ... second question. Of the 25,000 National Guard troops coming, how many of those are military police, please, for General Hokanson?

GEN HOKANSON: I apologize, I don't have the exact number of military police but we use an assortment of military police and security forces, and that's a balance between state requirements and what they're able to send here, but we can follow up with the exact number at a later time.

MR. HOFFMAN: OK, we'll keep going. Dan Lamothe, Washington Post?

Q: Yes, thanks for your time today -- today. I wanted to clarify what the threshold is for someone to be flagged here. For instance, if someone had a QAnon bumper sticker or t-shirt or something like that showing some amount of sympathy or interest, is that enough or does it take something more serious? Thank you.

MR. HOFFMAN: So I -- I don't want to speak for the -- the vetting that's underway but if our law enforcement partners flag an individual, based on their determination that they see something and they pass it to us, we're not even asking what the flag was, we're just removing them. So I can't speak for that.

Within the ranks, I think that it's what we've seen as -- as inappropriate comments and text had been it. I don't think that we have a -- a handbook on -- on what are thresholds for -- for inappropriateness at this point. We are just taking action against -- action to remove individuals if there is some indication that would indicate that they should not be here at this time.

OK, Phil Stewart, Reuters.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. So I just -- not to beat on a -- a dead horse here, but the -- the 12 people that were removed were removed after vetting, but the -- but the vetting was not necessarily for extremist groups, as I think I -- I had thought; that they were -- the vetting was for -- for ties to extremism. So I guess that -- so if that's true, then what is the -- is the vetting more broad than that? Are you looking into whether these people have, like, you know, big debts and you know, other things that could allow and be compromised by a -- by a foreign adversary? I -- I'm a little confused about -- I thought this vetting was for extremism.

And then -- and then secondly, the two people that are removed from the Capitol, they're not part of the 12. So it'd be 12 plus two, correct?

GENERAL DANIEL HOKANSON: No, that's not true. So there's -- there's 10 that were identified by the FBI, and I -- and I can't speak to the level of vetting that they do, but I know it's -- they said it's a standard they do for all inaugurations for participants.

With the other two, they're separate from those 10, for a total of 12. One was identified by the chain of command, and another was identified through anonymous reporting.

MR. HOFFMAN: And -- and Phil, to the first part, our understanding is that the -- the review and the vetting is broader. As you indicated, we're -- we're not just looking for ties to -- to one particular threat stream; We're looking for any indication that an individual should not be included in the inaugural events.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right, David Martin, CBS.

QUESTION: I have no question.

MR. HOFFMAN: OK. Sylvie, AFP.

QUESTION: Yes, hello. I would like to go back to the reason why there were flagged -- the two were flagged. You mentioned inappropriate comments or texts. Were these comments of a political nature?

MR. HOFFMAN: We're -- we're not going to get into what the -- the comments and texts were, other than to say that they were inappropriate, and they -- they've -- they rose to the level that, in one case, the chain of command flagged them and made a

determination to remove them, and in the other case, that there was a, as General Hokanson mentioned, a -- a -- a comment posted -- or sorry, a -- a comment provided over a tip line that when their chain of command was made aware of it, they decided to remove him. But we're not going to get into the specifics of what the comments were right now. There'll be time for that.

Warren?

QUESTION: Given that the -- the issues that were pulled or the issues that were flagged are not related to two weeks ago, a week and a half ago, are you concerned that your own background screening didn't pick this up?

MR. HOFFMAN: For -- for which individuals? For the -- the broader...

QUESTION: Any of the 12.

MR. HOFFMAN: Well, I -- so I -- I don't want to get into the -- the exact vetting that's undertaken. My understanding from -- from what has been explained to me by law enforcement partners is that some of the information that -- that would flag an individual is not necessarily information that would, if pursued, would lead someone to understand that a person's committed a crime or as someone who is -- is compromised. But it is just, it's a piece of information, and at this point in time, we don't have the -- the -- the timeframe in which to run down every single piece of information and determine whether that -- that individual may not -- should not be a part of the military or not, but it's enough information right now that just that flag alone, we've determined that that is enough to remove them from the Capitol.

QUESTION: And do you, at this point, know how many of the FBI has gone through of the 12?

MR. MUIR: No, I don't have that information for you. Sorry.

Luis ?

QUESTION: Two questions for you, General, and to Jonathan. What happens to these individuals when they go back? I mean, you've caught them. Is -- is this something that triggers disciplinary action or something else like that? That's first. And then secondly, can you talk about the -- the follow-through mission? Tomorrow is the inauguration. You're going to have all of these personnel in town. How long do -- do you intend to keep them for? Is there a plan that this is an extended mission? And -- go ahead.

GEN. HOKANSON: So thank you, Luis. So with respect to the first question, so obviously, once that's -- those folks are identified, we'll make sure that we follow through with either law enforcement or the chain of command, which is ever the appropriate venue, until we get exact resolution on each and every one of those individuals.

With respect to the mission after the inauguration, and so we brought on 6,200 for 30 days. On June -- January 7th, and so they'll go into February. And that number can go up or down, depending on the lead federal agency requirements or federal law enforcement requests. But really, after the inauguration, we'll look at the conditions and the environment and the mission set that we're asked to perform, and if that is below the number of personnel that we have, then we'll start identifying those folks to get them home as -- as quickly as possible.

QUESTION: And so the drawdown could occur rather quickly then?

GEN. HOKANSON: Absolutely, and that'll be conditions-based, but yeah, it could be quick or it could be over time.

MR. HOFFMAN: And as the general mentions, we're -- we're in support of federal law enforcement right now. NSSE is -- Secret Service has the lead past the inauguration. That may continue for a period of time, but then other federal law enforcement will have that lead and -- and we will still be supporting them.

I'll just remind everyone on the phone that we have another very capable, talented senior executive here, Tom Muir, who's available to answer questions and -- on the inauguration that you've been hammering us to answer over the last few days. So he -- he's here, if you have anything.

Tom Vandenberg, USA Today?

QUESTION: Sorry, Jonathan, nothing here.

MR. HOFFMAN: Dan De Luce, NBC?

QUESTION: Yeah, thanks. You just -- this is such a large force here for the inauguration. How confident are you that -- that you and the federal government and the FBI have been able to properly screen and vet all of these troops? Do you think this is obviously not a -- a typical situation?

GEN. HOKANSON: Well, in this case, we're working very closely with the FBI, and I know that we've been providing all the information they need as our -- our troops show up into the national Capitol region, and I've been assured that they'll get all the vetting complete.

MR. HOFFMAN: Yeah. I mean, the -- the Secret Service handles large events on regular basis in which they are -- are able to -- to screen and -- and vet attendees. The FBI handles events, as well. We have continuous vetting and screening going on within the department. This is obviously an unusual situation in which it is all hands on deck, and we're leaving no stone unturned. But we here are confident that there will be no opportunity to identify any potential threat left done.

And so we're going to do all we can. We're going to partner with the Secret Service and the FBI and others to ensure that we are all doing everything we can. We're all rowing in the same direction, and that is to ensure that the president-elect and the vice president-elect have a safe and secure inauguration tomorrow at 12 noon.

All right, Jeff?

QUESTION: Thank you. I -- I was just following up on one of my colleague's questions. You had said there'll be a later time to describe the type of texts and messages that these two servicemembers sent. Isn't now the time? This is the largest news story in the world. Can the Defense Department at least characterize the texts or communications that these two National Guardsmen sent? Were they plotting against vice -- President-elect Biden? Were they threatening violence? What exactly were they saying?

MR. HOFFMAN: So I'll -- I think the general's characterized, and I'll characterize them. They were inappropriate texts. There's going to be a -- a continued look at this, and whether that is a internal DOD look within their chain of command or a investigation by others is -- is something that's being determined. So it -- I -- I don't want to get ahead of that investigation and get in the way of that. We're providing information here to the American public.

What's important for them to know is that those individuals have been removed, they will not be at the Capitol. And if we uncover anyone else with sending inappropriate messages or has flags that have been identified by our law enforcement partners, they will be removed as well.

Q: Well, I appreciate that you're doing everything you can. But in this case, it almost sounds like the Defense Department is trying to hide this. What is it that they -- can you say? Did they threaten President-elect Biden or Kamala Harris? Can you at least rule that out?

MR. HOFFMAN: Jeff, once again, I'll say that we have an ongoing investigation into it. I will share that the comments were inappropriate, and the individuals have been removed and the appropriate authorities will continue to investigate.

All right, we'll do a few more.

Tara Copp, McClatchy?

Q: Hi, Jonathan, thank you for doing this.

My question is for General Hokanson, is, do you think that there will be a need for an overall rescreening of all Guard members, moving forward, since this kind of re-vetting for the inauguration has popped up a few concerning things?

And how would you go about doing that? It seems like it would be extremely difficult, given the dual role, civilian-military, and the need to do what you've characterized before as kind of a constant monitoring? Thank you.

GEN HOKANSON: Thanks, sir.

I would say with respect to the current processes that we have and policies, that we'll continue to do those. And also really looking across the chain of command and their coordination with their soldiers and airmen at every level.

But I don't see any -- any current change in policies. If there are, obviously, we'll enforce them, but I think the policies are already there in place, and we'll continue to utilize those to identify any concerns that we might have.

MR. HOFFMAN: Abraham, Washington Examiner?

Q: Yeah, I just wanted to get clarification. Thanks a lot for calling on me. Wanted to get clarification of that 6,600 number for 30 days that -- can you kind of break out? There's 25,000 Guard members in -- providing security in the Capitol right now. That number's going to drop down to 6,600 only they -- yeah, I'll let you clarify that, thanks.

GEN HOKANSON: So with respect to the 25,000 that we currently have, that's to meet all of the requirements that have been requested by the lead federal agency -- in this case, the United States Secret Service. And so that's the amount that they required for the inauguration.

When we look post-inauguration, it'll depend on the conditions and of course the missions that were provided, but we did put 6,200 on early so there would at least be a residual element here if it was necessary.

And now, as we go into the days following from here, we'll stay in close coordination with all the federal law enforcement agencies to make sure that we meet their requirements but if we have excess capability and capacity, of course, we want to get those soldiers and airmen home, back home to their families and employers as soon as we can.

MR. HOFFMAN: All right, (inaudible)?

(OFF-MIKE)

MR. HOFFMAN: OK.

Jennifer?

Q: Just a quick follow-up, sorry, sir. There's also a report that -- that there was chatter among QAnon websites suggesting that some QAnon members wanted to put on National Guard uniforms, and that there was concern about that. And that there's also concern that National Guard are concerned that people are taking videos and pictures of them at the Capitol.

Can you address that? Is that accurate, was there a law enforcement warning about somebody wanting to put on National Guard uniforms?

GEN HOKANSON: Absolutely. We're in close coordination with the FBI and any and all things that they come up with that may be of concern, we share that across our force. Because we want to make sure that no matter what situation we're in, our soldiers and airmen are prepared and ready to complete their mission -- really, to protect people and property and also be able to defend themselves.

Q: But you're confirming that there were concerns about those...

(CROSSTALK)

GEN HOKANSON: Yes, there are always concerns about stuff like that and we just work with the law enforcement agencies because they provide that information. And if we see indications of anything that doesn't look right, we report it immediately.

MR. HOFFMAN: OK. All right, I will -- Tom, I apologize for -- for -- for dragging you down here, but thank you for coming. Tom's got a busy day tomorrow, has a great plan in place. We've been working closely with the Biden team.

As you guys know, my -- my relief will be here tomorrow at 12:01 p.m., so looking forward to getting him on board and getting him up to speed. And next time you guys are in here, he'll be -- he'll be the one briefing you. So I know that'll be a -- he will do an incredibly good job at that, as he has always done.

So I just wanted to take a moment to thank all of you who cover the Pentagon. What you guys do is important. I've enjoyed almost all of our conversations over the past two years. I have been privileged to speak to you guys from up here and I really do appreciate the work you do, it's important.

I want to thank the DOD Public Affairs teammates for their effort in sharing the good work of the Department. I also want to thank those career military/civilian civil servants, such as General Hokanson and Tom Muir, for all they do to make this a great institution.

And finally, given all the country has been through recently -- importantly, with COVID, civil unrest and the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, it's important to note that in times of hazard the American people continue to turn to for assistance the most great American -- the most trusted American institution, which is the U.S. military.

So at a time when a lot of institutions --and so many of them -- are under assault, the credibility, transparency and integrity of the Department of Defense should be prized and husbanded. The men and women in uniform at DOD are among the best among all of us.

And while we all do not want to find ourselves in times where the nation continues to need DOD to be a rock for civil society, we're here and we'll continue to perform that role and be capable of being such. But hopefully that time will pass soon. And when that does, we'll return our focus to our mission and our foreign adversaries who have not been distracted one bit.

So with that, take care. Get yourselves vaccinated. And hopefully we'll see you guys again soon. Thanks.

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DVIDS Link to Press Conference:

<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/780830/senior-dod-official-briefs-pentagon-reporters>